Jared Mackey March 1, 2026, Christ the King, John 3:1-16 Rebirth

Hi my name is Jared Mackey. I live down the block on Holly Street. I've been a part of this community since we started worshiping here in the neighborhood. I've been in the neighborhood for about 26 years. And uh I don't remember exactly when I first heard it. Uh but the words were in my memory before I can remember them. **For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.** For a preachers's kids from a preachers's kid from Oklahoma, **John 3:16** was known before I had a memory. I'd like to give you a little bit of insider info. Uh when you're a preacher's kid from Oklahoma, John 3:16 just kind of came with the birthright. Here's a little other info about being a preacher or a preacher's kid. Uh preachers keep files on the sermons that they've read and they've written. And the last time that I taught John 3:16 was 22 years ago. I titled the talk creatively **Nick at Night**. It was a bad joke then as much as it is now.

But uh I was in a season where being clever was more interesting than being clear. So I shared with Jesse as he invited me to reflect and teach on John 3:16. It's actually quite a fascinating text to be presented with because we come as both teachers and listeners with our predispositions and presumptions that we already know what it's going to say. John 3:16, right? It's the one that's held up at signs at sporting events. It's on billboards across cities. Hundreds of faded wooden signs in the heartland of America. All with this text, John 3:16. 3:16. It's the OG. It's more OG than WWJD. John 3:16 is like this thing that everybody already knows. So why would anyone even dare to say anything else about it? **But what if we could hear this and read it as if we didn't know the punchline?** What if we could hear in this season of Lent as we pilgrimage toward the cross a conversation between a curious old man and the son of God?

What if we could hear for ourselves what it would be like to sit across the table from Jesus with our own curiosity, questions, and doubt. That is my hope as we visit John 3, the Gospel of John. This masterpiece of writing that I fell in love with because of a Jesuit priest named **Father Vince**. When I met him, I was 40 and he was 80. And at the point that I met him, Father Vince had been studying the Gospel of John for 50 years. He was what they would call a **Yanian disciple**. He had given himself to the study of a singular book and that book was the gospel of John. He caused me to fall in love with the gospel of John to see it for all the beauty and the mystery and the brilliance in the way that John would write to help us hear and experience and enter the story of Jesus. So before we get to act three or John 3, I feel it's important to catch up on where we've been in John 1 and 2.

John 1 is the prologue in this poetic brilliance that echoes Genesis 1 that says, "**Everything that is is because of the love of God.**" John the Baptizer announces Jesus's arrival on the scene. And that uh arrival on the scene very quickly follows with an invitation of Jesus's first friends and followers, Peter, James, John, Nathaniel. And there's brief dialogue with each of these that foreshadows some of the future relationship and glory that they will be able to witness. Which leads us very quickly into John 2. John 2 then opens at another scene. It is at a wedding. The wedding is at Kaa and Jesus is in a conversation with his mother. It's a fascinating conversation between a f uh excuse me, a mother and a son. But we're not going to go there

tonight. But the mystery and the beauty of Kaa is juxtaposed at the very end of John 2 with then the conflict in Jerusalem as Jesus clears out the temple.

So by the end of John 2, John has set the stage. He set the stage that Jesus is going to do miraculous things. He's going to be in conflict with some pretty significant people. And he has set the plot in which John chapter 3 opens. And Father Vince in only his way would say, could you imagine sitting in a theater and the curtain has gone down from act two and then the curtain raises again for act three. And act three has a particular person In a particular place, there was a man, **Nicodemus**, who came to Jesus by night. It's a bare stage and there's an old man sitting on the stage looking to have a conversation with Jesus. That is the scene of John 3. It's an old man who comes with curiosity.

And it is this first extended exchange in John's gospel, but it is not uh unique to Nicodemus in that John will actually thread his whole gospel with these **intimate interactions**These dialogues are between Jesus and one other person because John is writing to invite us into as if we were that one other person who was in a conversation with Jesus. We are invited to see ourselves as the old man sitting across the table from Jesus alone there on the stage at night. The conversations with Jesus are always unique to the individual. This conversation with an old religious man is different from the woman at the well who was very much an outsider to the religious elite. But that's very different from the Roman military officer who would have been seen as the other or enemy. And that was very different from Mary in the garden after the resurrection or Peter next to the fire on the beach.

But all of them are these one-on-one interactions in which we are invited back into seeing ourselves in the story. And all of the conversations all have these threads and notes of **love and grace**. But those notes are played in particular tunes, unique progressions to each person in each conversation. So before John 3:16 shows up on the bottom of In-N-Out cups or on the uh written on athletes cleats, it is a conversation between two people. It's an elderly Jewish religious leader who has some curiosity about the way that reality is about who God is and who Jesus is. And so could we read it with curiosity about that original context and culture? Nicodemus is this religious ruler who in his own words describes himself as old, which I now find myself doing. So I find that I have some uh familiarity with Nicodemus and this and then it says the place in which Nicodemus comes is at night. And why is it at night?

Well, some people think it was safer for Nicodemus to be identified with Jesus having a conversation at night. And other people say, "Well, maybe Nicodemus was actually trying to be kind to Jesus and not stir up more trouble by being a Pharisee in conversation with him and being somewhat sympathetic to him." Well, whatever the reason, the most important thing is to recognize who Nicodemus is having this conversation. The most important thing about Nicodemus is what? Well, it's his **birth**. Of course, because Nicodemus exists in a context in which his birth is his identity. In a page turner called Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John, the author writes this quote, "**Birth status was the single all-important factor in determining a person's honor rating.** Ascribed honor, the honor derived from one's status at

birth, was simply a given. It usually stayed with a person for life. The most important thing about Nicodemus was his birth.

His identity was all wrapped into who he was born into the world as. And so this beautiful literary writing is of course that Jesus is going to talk to him about what? Birth. Well, we'll get to that here in just a second. The other thing that I want to note in reading this text over and over again as you heard Jesse read it, the conversation ends without resolution, which is difficult depending on your predisposition towards Jesus' conversations. Uh the tradition I grew up in went something like this. Anytime you talk to anyone about Jesus, it needs to end with like John 3:16 and a prayer. right? You needed to close the deal. And I would just offer that Jesus seemed uh really non- anxious about closing the deal. **Jesus seemed very interested in the dialogue and in the interaction.** Seemed very interested and invested in Nicodemus's questions.

And so I think it creates a healthy amount of tension for us and is a good reminder for us that the next time that we actually see Nicodemus in the book of John is after the crucifixion. Nicodemus comes back on stage now not with questions but with a request and that request is for the body of Jesus. There's this beautiful bookend to John that the first time we see Nicodemus he is sitting across from Jesus with all of his questions and the second time we see Nicodemus. He is there taking the body of Jesus. The body of the one that he had all the questions for and couldn't quite figure out. He is now asking for his body to go bury. But that's getting ahead of ourselves. Let's look at John chapter 3. And I would like to offer three reflections on three words from John 3. **Birth, wind, and love.** Which sounded really close to earth, wind, and fire, but I'm trying. trying not to title my talks that badly anymore. Birth, wind, and love. Nicodemus shows up.

He says, "It's clear that God's with you. Could you expound on how I could get in on that?" That's Jared's version of what Nicodemus's question is. Nicodemus is genuinely curious. It seems to be that you are uniquely connected to God. How does that work? And how could that work for me? And Jesus responds, "Well, the only way that you could only see reality, true reality, and experience the life that you really want. Nicodemus and this kingdom of God that you deeply long for is that if you're reborn and **born again** and born from above and born from the beginning and ironically I think that we read Jesus's words maybe with as much confusion as Nicodemus heard them. This is the moment where the English language does not hold up to the weight of the words that are going on.

The Greek here about birth or born again or born from above is antheon excuse me an uh **anan** means uh to be born of or born from again or born from the beginning or born from the top and and so if you read the commentaries there's quite a bit of argument and Chaz pointed out books have been uh written on two different points of view is it born again or is it born from above because it does seem to be that there's a little bit of difference and nuance about how you read that and I would offer Jesus would say yes both Jesus was a master and John poetically be right in a way that is disorienting. Jesus is saying you have to be born all over. You have to be born from above and born from again. You have to take it from the top. You have to start all over. Nicodemus reality is not what you believe it to be. And we like Nicodemus might

think that's really hard chronologically because we like Nicodemus think okay so rebirth is like restart and like how do I start over again?

because I'd like to start over again, but how do I do that? Now, you might be better than I am, but mostly I start every Sunday with this question like, how do I start over again? How could this week be better? , every week, every month, March 1st, it's always an opportunity. We can do this month a little bit better than we did last month. Every year is a new year. Every season is a new season. Every lint is a new lint. For those of us who would like to think that restarts and rebirths and starting up all over again is under our control. I think we hear this idea of like you can try to do it over again. It's like the contemporary poet Chris Martin in the song the scientist by this little band called Coldplay and he says I want to go back to the start because all of us in our own human desires and our best intentions would like to start over. over again knowing what we know now and do it just a little bit differently and try a little bit harder and get it a little bit more right.

But I think Jesus says with a little bit of a grin, **you're not the one who's in control of being born.** A quick grammar lesson about a right born from above is actually born, which is something that you don't do. Born from above, like being born for the first time, is something that's done to us and for us. Being born biologically is not something that we decided. I entered the world on June 20, 1973 at St. Anony's Hospital in Oklahoma City. I arrived, but I was not the one in control of my arrival. More importantly, I was not the one who thought of me, who created me. And our physical births begin with a creation that's far before us and beyond us. And so the grammar and the imagery of birth that God is the one that is doing this born from above is something that is beyond us and before us. A friend shared with me as we pondered this mystery of Jesus's word about birth.

Quote, "**We trust we enter the world because of the love of another.**" Now I know that that is not the truth of everyone. one's origin of birth, but it is what we would hope for us all. We trust that we have entered the world because of the love of another. And I think this is what Jesus is saying to this curious old religious leader. When you're born from above, you get to see and live into a new reality that is the kingdom of God because of the love of another. Birth is the metaphor that Jesus invites this curious old man to consider. And how challenging it is to begin again, to be reborn is for Nicodemus. Because go back to the most important thing about Nicodemus is his first birth. To be born all over again, to be born for the second time, however unthinkable that event might be for him, would alter his honor in this society in a very fundamental way.

This second birth, if different, substantially in honor from his first birth would be a life-changing event of staggering proportions. And I would simply offer that Nicodemus is not the first or the last person that Jesus confronts with about their misplaced identity to who you were born or where you were born. Jesus says you must be born again. **To be born again is not under my control.** It's not under my energy. But it is trusting that there is a love beyond me. It's an invitation to reconsider our life not from a point of control, but a point of grace. It's to see that we enter a reality created in love and by love and for love. And I would offer that the kingdom of

heaven is the reality that you are born again into every morning. Sunday, March 1st is a day once again to be born again. So our second word just about as clear as is the first one, **wind**. Jesus and Nicodemus's conversation continues with word play, but this time it's with this word wind.

Jesus explains the mystery of birth with the mystery of wind. And he says, well, the wind blows, you know, wherever it wishes, right, Nicodemus? He explains rebirth with another double word. And the word that Jesus uses as he goes on to describe wind and the spirit as the spirit moves wherever it pleases this Greek word **numa**. Uh both the gale force wind that can knock you over in the slight breeze that just kind of brushes against your cheek. Both the physical wind that animates the kite in the sky and the spiritual wind that animates the life and the breath within us. Jesus is like, "Oh, well that's the wind. That's the spirit. When and where and how this happens, it really just depends on your perspective, Nicodemus." And Nicodemus, like us, is like, "What? And how and what and how?" And I as I was reading this uh kind of snarky commentary person said, "There's only two kinds of people in the world.

Those who believe that the motion of the trees makes the wind move and those who know that the wind moves the trees. And I think Nicodemus and us are sometimes more often like the people who think the trees are moving the wind, not the wind that's moving the trees. It's similar to the third thought, you know, of early civilizations that thought that the earth was flat. That's a spoiler alert. Sorry. We could talk about that after the sermon. or that the earth was the center of the universe. That's another one. My daughter can explain that one to you. But we tend to show up and move through life as if we are the mover. Believe that we have in some ways to become and remain at the center of life. And that's not just for the toddler that's in your home. It's for all of us who think that the motion of our lives makes things move. **But Jesus is inviting us to consider that it is in fact the spirit that is moving in us and all around us.**

And our part is to pay attention, to notice, to witness. Nicodemus feels a little lost and I think we do as well when we first start to consider that I am not the center of the universe. In fact, this great story of God is one that I am entering and God's story that's swirling around me is what I need to pay attention to. We slowly come to see ourselves not at the center. We slowly come to see the sacredness that is all around us. The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, quote, "**Earth is crammed with heaven and every common bush a fire with God, but only he who sees takes off his shoes.** Earth's crammed with heaven and every common bush a fire with God. But only he who sees takes off his shoes. Jesus is saying, Nicodemus, the spirit is all around you, blowing in you and through you, but you have to learn to listen and witness the wind.

The season of Lent It's a season in which we desire to be, through practice and perspective, more attentive to the wind, the movement of the spirit, maybe gentle breeze or maybe stormy skies. For me, the practice of **examine** is the way in which I notice and name the holy of each day. At the end of the day, I just ask a couple of questions believing that I can pay a bit attention to where the wind is blowing. There might be a little bit of me that remembers that I am not in fact the tree that's moving the wind, but the wind is in fact moving the trees. That the spirit is in fact blowing all around. If I can be attentive and be witness to some of those questions that

are simply like what was the best and what was the hardest and what was the kindest and what questions did I have today and what do I want to remember from today and how would I like to enter tomorrow differently? I would offer the prayer of the exam. It is always this invitation for us to notice the spirit.

Jesus's words, be born again, begin again. Jesus's words, it's the spirit that animates all of reality in you and around you. Look again, Nicodemus. Jesus's words about being born and the wind lead us to the final word of Jesus, which is the word of **love**. That's right.

Eugene Peterson. The late author and pastor and theologian described heresy as a lie about God. The heresy that Jesus corrects for Nicodemus is the fundamental question that all of us at some point have about who God is. The lie is pretty simple. It shows up in two different versions. The lie about God like this. God isn't there or God doesn't care. And Jesus corrects these lies to Nicodemus and tells him the truth about who God is. This final word might be a bit more familiar. The word of love, **agape**. It's that self-giving, self-sacrificing, covenantal, loyal love that occurs over a hundred times in the New Testament. Almost half of the times agape is used to describe love is in the Gospel of John. And it is in this dial here in John act three that reveals the reality of the story and the stage that have all been set. Imagine again the old man sitting here across from Jesus at night and he is the first to hear Jesus say, "**For God so loved.**" What would it be like to be the first person who ever heard Jesus tell you what God was like? For God so loved the world. This interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus is the first time we hear Jesus's own words tell us who the father is like. **God is the father who loves us so much that he sends his son.** This is the character of God. Jesus says that God is love. Do you want to know what God is like? Look at Jesus. Do you want to know what love is like? Look at Jesus. Martin Luther referred to John 3:16 as a quote, "The heart of the Bible, the gospel in miniature end quote." This is the heart of God. This love of God captured John who wrote about it. That gospel Father Vince studied, taught, and decades later reintroduced me. I don't remember when I first heard John 3:16, but I do remember the first time when Father Vince said, "Who is the beloved in John?" Growing up as a preacher's kid, I wanted to raise my hand because I knew the right answer. I was like, Oh, the beloved is John. But because I didn't raise my hand, it was a good thing because Father Vince said, "If you think it's John, it's because you have yet to receive that you are the beloved. **You are the beloved of God.**" All of this is about God's love for you. The reason that the story is written is so that you would enter into the story and find yourself at home in God's love. David Benner wrote this book. , Surrender to Love, Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality. It's the one book on God's Love that I reread almost every year because it reminds me that the heart of the Christian life is surrendering to love. That love is the beginning and love is the end. Augustine wrote that the whole Bible does nothing but tell us of God's love. And then went on to say that God loved all of us as if there was only one of us. The saints over all the century come to the final word of who God is, who Jesus is, who you and I were created in and for. Love. **Love is the generative origin of our birth.** If you want to understand being born again, understand the love of God. Love is the animating energy of the spirit all around us. If you want to understand how the spirit moves, then you understand love. Jesus invites us into this life of love. to be born again, to be born above in love for love. And

Jesus invites us to live again, to move again, to be witnesses to the responsive and incredible overwhelming love of God. The final word is love.

Let's pray. *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son that whoever trusts in him would have eternal life. Father, thank you for the invitation to reconsider. That is in fact love that we are born and reborn into that. It is love that animates everything around us and within us. Thank you for the invitation every week here at the table to return to the final word, the word of love. Amen.*